Perceptible, At Last

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Perceptible, At Last

by Phantomato

Summary

Knox becomes that lawyer, and Charlie becomes that banker, but eight years after Welton, nothing else in their life looks like they expected.

“Knoxious, looking tall as ever,” Charlie says. He slides into his seat with a little slouch, an impressive feat for a bar stool without a back, but it’s pure Charlie and Knox would never expect otherwise—this isn’t something that changes in four years, no matter what else might.

Charlie’s back from California, certified Berkeley grad, not as tan as Knox would have expected but then Knox is painfully aware that he doesn’t know anything about what California’s actually like. Maybe they don’t have beaches in Berkeley. Maybe it’s not that kind of place. He only sort of knows what he’s picked up from the movies, and all of those are set in LA. Charlie’s hair is a little long for the East Coast, but in a funny way, where it’s blunt at the ends like he just got it cut—like it had been longer pretty recently, and this is Charlie’s best approximation of what the prep set expects. Knox rubs the back of his own head, regulation-length and prickly, with embarrassment.

“It’s nice to see you,” Knox says because he’s supposed to say it. Charlie’s only in town for a couple of weeks, and he’s not really in town at all. He’s out on Martha’s Vineyard but he can take the family car for an afternoon to meet up. He said it all over the phone when Knox called. Knox heard through the grapevine, Meeks’s cousin’s parents have a summer home on the same street in the Vineyard as the Daltons do, that Charlie was passing through after graduation, and, well. It’s been a little while. Not since Charlie was expelled, actually, since Knox’s parents didn’t like the idea of him spending time with a bad influence. And yeah, maybe he could have snuck away over some of those summers in college, but he’d had his friends from the fraternity and his internships at the big New York law firms, and Charlie was—it’s different, is all, to see Charlie four and a half years older, in a rugby shirt and madras shorts, hair too long to truly blend.

Knox wears a summer suit in linen because he’s not a kid anymore. He shouldn’t feel like he’s the one that stands out. Every other man at the bar is dressed like him, and half of them even have a hat or a waistcoat, but Charlie’s always had a way with making the rest of the world feel square. Charlie rolls his eyes like he can hear all this going in Knox’s head.

“Yale Law, I heard. Good for you, man.” Only, Charlie says it like he doesn’t mean it. Not that he resents Knox, but that he doesn’t think it’s all that interesting.

Feeling cut, Knox pushes back. He shouldn’t, but he’s back to being fifteen, before everything happened. “What’s next for you?” he asks.

Charlie's not going to Yale Law, or Harvard Business School, or any place they would have held sacred when they were still at Welton. Charlie's parents shipped him off to god-damned California after how it all shook out. He would be lucky if a Harvard or a Yale even looked at his application packet without rejecting it on return address alone.

Charlie's mouth tightens. They're supposedly drinking, but Knox can't taste it when he puts the glass to his lips, and he doubts that Charlie can either. Charlie says, "Finance," like he wants to spit. "They do have banks outside of New York, you know."

"You majored in finance?" Knox can't see it.

He's right. "Math," Charlie says.

"Your parents must have hated that," Knox replies.

"We all learned something about compromise. I didn't shock the grandparents with an anthropology degree, and I didn't suffer my way through the business program. Math is harder than econ or business, anyway."

"Not a lot of girls in math, I bet." Knox isn't sure why he says it, other than maybe he's still feeling resentful. He's had—a lot of girls. A lot. College was good to him.

Charlie looks him over, up and down from Knox's suede loafers to his slicked-back hair. Knox wishes he'd never called the Daltons's summer home number, given how much that look burns.

"Not a lot of girls in my life these days," Charlie says, like it means something that isn't totally pathetic. Knox can't figure out what it does mean, though.

That's the last time they see each other for another four years.

Fresh from breaking things off with his fiancée, Cheryl, Knox isn't feeling so fab. Cheryl was funny, pretty, a few years younger and the sort of blonde beauty who would have hosted wonderful parties. She wasn't a bad choice. She was a little flighty, though, sort of a flirt who didn't want to step out but did like to be chased, and Knox has much less time for chasing as a junior lawyer working his way up from the bottom rung of his firm. Which is so typically him, Knox thinks; he always liked chasing them, he loved demonstrative love, and just as soon as he'd found a girl who he really could see himself settling with,

his life would shift under him. She might've thrown some things during the split, cried and shouted a lot, and it all felt earned.

Knox spends his time trying what feels like every bar in New York, except for the queer ones and the poor ones, so it's less like every bar and more like he's jumping between the watering holes for all the cliques in the legal and banking industries. If he doesn't visit any bar more than once, he can't be recognized, he won't be a regular, and no one will ask him why he's out every night after work instead of taking the train back to a nice house and a wife in the suburbs.

The place tonight is in Midtown. It's got dark wood-paneled ceilings and the color makes them feel low, like Knox is going to hit his head on the beam between each square of paneling. The floor is disorienting too, covered in patterned tile. It's all he can manage to make his way to the bar, order a drink, and stay upright.

There's a man standing by a table, all his companions in rapt attention. The bar is too noisy for Knox to hear the story the guy is telling, but it must be something compelling, because all the stiffs the guy's with are leaning forward, drinks forgotten. The storyteller doesn't really fit in—he's got a shaggy mop of hair, just short enough in the back to not get him fired, but definitely Lennon-inspired overall. It covers the tips of his ears. And he's the only one of them not in a suit. He's wearing separates, a green sport coat with darker green pants, fabric with a little texture to it, like he's got money to burn and isn't afraid of being trendy. Knox knows the type of guy. There's one in every friend group, the contrarian, the reckless one, the guy who doesn't seem to fear consequences. That's never been Knox. He's not quite that slick.

All of this would be nothing but a moment's distraction if a newcomer hadn't called across the room to that group—"Charlie!", bright and bold—and the man of the hour hadn't turned around to reveal himself as Charlie god-damned Dalton. Because Knox is distinctly uncool, he stands up and gapes and makes a big melodramatic shock of it, clutching his tie and stumbling through an unwanted interruption into this after-work social.

"Apologies," he says, over and over, feeling every inch of his height. Charlie's no help, mostly staring at him, mouth half-open like he forgot to close it. Up close, he's still Charlie: kind of a funny face, hair in his eyes no matter the style, about five seconds from saying something ill-advised. Or, he would be, if he hadn't somehow lost the ability to speak.

Charlie nods, or something like it, at Knox's invitation to have a drink, to catch up. The banking stiffs leave well enough alone; they're probably happy to gossip about the awkward stranger who knows Charlie before spending an hour talking numbers. Knox isn't sure what he's supposed to say, though, which is probably why his opening line is so terrible.

"I thought you would be in California."

"They have banks here, too," Charlie says, muzzily. "I thought you would be married." He grabs Knox's left hand, as though they're still boys allowed to do that sort of thing, and rubs his thumb over the ring finger. It makes Knox's skin jitter. "But you're not married. What did you fuck up?"

"Hey," Knox says, quietly. There's nothing else to say. He's been skewered in one. "Hey," he says again, like it might work better the second time.

"I mean, you're such a romantic sap. Women love that. Maybe it didn't work so well on the girls, but flowers and poetry and grand gestures—that's the stuff you build a marriage on, Knoxy. If you couldn't do it, where's the hope for the rest of us?" Charlie's manic grin is the prelude to so many bad decisions. Knox should walk away now, or right after this drink, and say he's done his duty. Meeks would love to know about it, he's the one who keeps tabs on all of the old Welton guys, and no one's heard directly from Charlie in years.

He doesn't, of course. He stays. He says, "That's not fair, Charlie," like Charlie has ever remotely tried for a baseline of fairness.

"Fair," Charlie says, turning the word around in his mouth. "You haven't asked me how I fucked up, and that's not really fair, either. It's a very one-sided sort of catch-up between old friends, Mr. Overstreet. I wouldn't call that fair."

Motioning onward with his hand, Knox says, "Well, fine. You tell me." He still can't swear as casually as all that.

Like he can smell the deficiency, Charlie brightens his grin. "Dear old Dad died."

"I'm sorry to hear that." It's an automatic response. No one they know likes their father.

"Just my luck to be the boy of the family, isn't it? Mother didn't like

being so far from her only son. Here I am, then."

"So you're with… ?"

"First National," Charlie says, like he's spitting, an echo of past disappointments. "Me and a department full of bums who don't remember how to find a derivative, modeling the future of the markets. It sure gives you a lot of hope." Every word smells like bile.

"And why aren't you married?" Knox asks. It is a critical mistake. Charlie's eyes go wide and wild, but the words hang between them and there's no taking them back.

"Knox," Charlie says. Just that.

Defensive and unsure why he needs to be, Knox says, "You asked me."

"You could have actually done it."

"You're—handsome, young, wealthy. It's not as though you couldn't get married," Knox argues. He's annoyed now because he hates feeling stupid and left-behind. While nearly everyone he knows balances work and life and interests, Knox has never been good at dividing his focus. He is full-intensity about whatever is most important, and so no, he hasn't thought much about the last time he saw Charlie or what Charlie said then or what it would mean, other than the obvious. Charlie majored in a subject for eggheads, college girls didn't date eggheads any more than high school girls did, and that was that.

"You do… date." Knox has dated since Cheryl. They were not good dates, but a man takes a woman to the movies and kisses her good night, that's just the done thing. In a city like New York, there are thousands of nice women to take to the movies or the theater or even just out for dinner, for something to do on a Saturday night.

Charlie is still smiling, but his smile is vicious. "They don't call what I do 'dating,' Knox." He's being crass and gross on purpose, the way he used to act with teachers, setting up a trap where ignoring Charlie was untenable and so the teachers were left with no choice but to walk straight into it. It's insulting, it's mean, and the only reason to do it is that Charlie wants something.

If he hates Knox this much and he doesn't need anything from him, he could just leave. He could call it enough of a catch-up and go back to his banking buddies, or he could head out for the night to do more of this—this non-dating, whatever that's meant to imply.

Whatever it is that Charlie wants, Knox doesn't like the idea of doing it in front of an audience. "Let's head out," he says.

"You're offering?"

Knox had not really intended to offer, but: "Sure, we can head back to my place."

Neither of them is drunk, and Knox won't be serving more. Charlie calms down a little when they get in a taxi; he stops glaring and waving his arms around, goes kind of quiet, slumps against the door. He only makes a few smart-ass comments about Knox's apartment building, which is rich given that his own is probably just as ritzy, but Knox takes the lumps in exchange for getting out of the halls more quickly.

When he closes his apartment door behind him, Charlie slams him into it and kisses him.

"What the hell, Charlie!" Knox pushes him away, but not fast enough not to have registered the kiss: soft lips and Charlie's fist in a firm grip on Knox's tie. He's never been with a woman who was aggressive like that. He doesn't think he would want it from one.

Charlie stares at him like he's stupid, his mouth slightly parted and his eyes open wide. "You offered."

"Whoa." Holding up his hands, palms flat, Knox says, "I thought that if you were going to insult me for another hour, I could bear it better in private. Not… whatever this is."

And then: "You don't call it dating," Knox adds.

Charlie keeps looking at him.

"You don't see a lot of girls." Knox drops his head back against his door. "Oh, fuck, Charlie."

"Yeah. That was the idea," Charlie says.

"I don't do that anymore." Not since Welton is what goes unsaid. Not since Charlie got expelled—or a little before that, not since, goodness, Chris. He hasn't thought of her in ages. "Not since women," is what he goes with.

Leaning into Knox, Charlie asks, his breath fluttering his bangs,

“Because you only like women?” Knox can’t breathe. “Or because you thought you couldn’t anymore?”

It’s been a long time since Cheryl, or it feels that way right now, with Charlie pressing up on Knox’s front, with Charlie mashing him into the door. Knox closes his eyes and makes a hybrid of past and present: Charlie as the object, short-haired and brutal, but holding him and kissing him like Knox has learned to kiss women. Knox touches places he would never have dared at seventeen—neck, back, hip, even sliding a hand down Charlie’s thigh and hoisting it up. They’re too close for Knox to ignore that Charlie is hard and grinding against him, and if this were happening with a steady girl Knox would suggest they move it to the bedroom.

He’s not sure he’s ready for that commitment. On a bed, they might have to undress. Knox might have to use his hand, which at least he’s done, or his mouth, which he hasn’t. That’s—he’s not ready for that. He’s definitely not ready for that.

Knox kisses Charlie with both hands on Charlie’s jaw, curling his fingers into Charlie’s shaggy hair, and abjectly refusing to open his eyes. He loves the taste of whisky in Charlie’s mouth and the sharp bite of Charlie’s teeth into his lips. The rest he can take, he can move in time with Charlie’s frantic hips and enjoy the friction. Finishing won’t be the issue; it has been a long time.

When Charlie comes, he breaks the kiss. He moans into Knox’s neck and hugs him, still humping. Knox sticks his hand down his own trousers and just—just presses, really, that’s all it takes to push himself over so that he can groan and pant and melt with Charlie into something resembling a satisfied afterglow.

They hang against the apartment door for one sharp-edged minute, not looking at each other. Knox keeps his eyes closed. Charlie’s eyelashes flutter against his neck, he can feel their feather-light kiss on his skin, and he tries not to wonder what it is that Charlie sees. They did this so well at sixteen. They were good at the necessary act of pretending.

Charlie is slow to let go of Knox, backing off incrementally, reluctantly ceding the neck and the chest and the crush of their legs. His hand on Knox’s waist is the last to go, but he needs it, finally, to fix his tie. “When are you usually home?” he asks. He looks straight at Knox. Knox looks somewhere slightly to the left of Charlie’s face, still close enough to notice the wildness his fingers introduced into Charlie’s

hair.

“By seven,” Knox says. He’s not sure why he does it, only he’s always been terrible at lying, by omission or otherwise.

“I’ll be seeing you,” Charlie says.

Knox smiles lopsidedly, one corner of his mouth pulling up, a grotesque approximation of normalcy. “Don’t be a stranger.”

Charlie Dalton re-enters Knox’s life like this:

He’s a meteor, crashing through an apartment door at night and shoving Knox into a kitchen counter, over the back of a sofa, up against a wall. He fucks hard and kisses harder.

He’s a whisper, buzzing up without announcement, never asking for a drink or staying for long enough to take off his jacket.

He’s a mystery, a guy like him, who’s got his youth and his money and a full head of hair, that even one of those Bohemian girls might try on for a spin, if all he wants is easy sex.

He’s transparent, his pain plain as day in the frown that slips back into place as soon as the flies are up again and the ties straightened, glancing over his shoulder before he heads out the front door.

Knox breaks first.

It was never going to be Charlie, solid old Charlie, who always took his beating like a stoic and dried his tears in private. Charlie said when he needed space, he never pretended like he didn’t, but he was good at using it. He took his space, he recovered, and he held firm. If he had decided not to talk about this arrangement, and he had decided not to talk about this arrangement, then he was never going to be the first to talk.

So Knox breaks first. He lets Charlie kiss him once, just through the door, and then backs off to the safety of his kitchen. “Something to drink?” he asks. Charlie’s expression conveys how little he thinks of that suggestion. “Unless you’ve got another engagement,” Knox says, and Charlie shakes his head, “I thought you could stay a while.”

This is what Knox knows how to do: weaponize social expectations so that it’s impossible to deny him what he wants. Yes, this makes him

overbearing, annoying, persistent, and even pushy. It also *works*. Charlie slinks to the sofa and allows Knox to bring over two cans of beer. The choice is calculated—liquor risks this turning messy and fast, and what Knox wants is to linger, for Charlie to sink so that his head rests against the low sofa back, for their knees to knock together as the record spins out. He doesn't remember what he put on, something light and popular, just like all the other albums he owns. Suddenly he's sure that Charlie won't like it. Charlie would have different tastes, more obscure ones, something selected purely on the merits of how well it offended sensibilities.

Charlie's shirt cuffs are rolled up to his elbows and his jacket is off, thrown over an empty chair. He drinks slowly, which is good, great, except that he doesn't talk. Knox offers conversation, over and over, scrabbling for a lifeline.

"How's work?"

"Talk to anyone I know lately?"

"Have you seen that new movie? The one with Dustin Hoffman as—"

"No," Charlie says. "Why am I here, Knox?"

Prissily, Knox turns rudeness back on him. "To fuck, presumably."

It shakes a laugh out of Charlie. "You've got me there," he says. He runs his hand through his shag, feather-fine strands of hair fluttering back into place as tidily as before. "Why here, Knox. We're not fucking. If that's what I'm here for, and it is, then you're doing a shit job of it."

"I thought we could talk."

"Isn't that what we've been doing?"

"No, Charlie," Knox says, stress building on his words. He can't keep the frustration out of his tone, though it makes Charlie look more like he might bolt. "I mean about this." He gestures between them, feeling the way the half-drunk beer moves in the can. "I don't know what you expect from it. That's untenable."

"You answered your own question already," Charlie tells him. "To fuck, wasn't it?"

"See, I think it's something more." Knox pushes. It's what he does.

“Because I’ve barely seen you since you were expelled—”

“You found me.” Charlie says this with conviction. He sits up, fists balled against the coarse weave of the upholstery to heave himself upright. “You came to my bar and you spoke to me. Before you accuse me of whatever you’re about to say, remember that I didn’t initiate any of this.”

“Except for the kissing,” Knox points out. “And the sex.”

He’s correct in the worst way, where saying it aloud only makes the other party more upset rather than less. Charlie scowls, the line between his eyes deep and dark. He has a gloomy face at the best of times and when he looks like this it’s positively terrible, some god of ill-omens and natural disasters packed into a mortal man’s body. If Knox had been better at the poetry thing, he might have tried to write about it.

“I am fine, happy, without Welton. Did you or anyone else consider that that’s why I never called back, wrote letters, made an effort to meet up? It doesn’t define my life like it apparently defines yours.”

“You went for three and a half years!” Knox yells, denting his can with the force of his outrage. “It was never fair that you were expelled and we all knew it. You’re as much one of us as anyone. Neil wouldn’t want this separation, Charlie.”

“Neil’s dead, Knox.”

That—that hurts.

“Neil wouldn’t want this,” Knox says again, more softly.

Charlie’s stormy face loses some of its edge, gentler in reaction to Knox’s present grief. It is a recognizable part of the old Charlie, at least. “Neil’s dead, and that’s why I got expelled.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I’m glad I hit Cameron, and I’m glad I didn’t speak against Mr. Keating. I don’t—I don’t even resent that the rest of you did.” Bits of nostalgic fondness shine through in a brief grin flashing across Charlie’s face. “We all knew I was the non-conformist.”

“You were,” Knox agrees.

Charlie jiggles his knee. “But I’m not stuck there. Neil’s not my only dead friend. You mourn, you meet new people, you keep going. I don’t regret anything. I don’t miss being at Welton and I don’t miss being that age.”

“But you took my call four years ago. You got a drink with me last month. You kissed me, Charlie.”

“You’re the only friend I miss, Knoxious. Missed,” Charlie corrects himself. “But I think we want different things.”

“You don’t want to talk,” Knox says.

“No.”

“You missed my friendship but you don’t want to talk?” It doesn’t make sense to Knox. He’s maybe not the sharpest guy when it comes to relationships, he’s bumbled through a lot of them, but he’s pretty sure that friends talk.

“Already answered that one,” Charlie says.

“Charlie—”

“I think I should go.” Just like that, Charlie has his jacket in his hands. He’s fast, fidgety and alert, jumping out the door with the saddest glance back as he runs away.

Knox waits to see him again. He waits, because he’s an idiot, for days which turn to weeks. At first he rushes home after work, to fret and clean and fiddle with his tie as six ticks over into seven and on to eight, nine, ten at night. He goes to bed hungry as often as not, having wasted the hours in waiting rather than being sensible enough to feed himself. When this habit reaches the point of absurdity, Knox becomes contrary and does the opposite. He spends his evenings at bars, a new one every night but never anything in Midtown, staying out later each time as though daring Charlie to show up. He can sit on the stoop and shiver in his scarf as penance for what he’s done to Knox.

The worst part—the worst part is that even a scant two months of having Charlie again leave an impression in Knox’s life. Their arrangement carved a new shape, evenings which did not linger and yet set a pattern for dinner hours, which changed how and when Knox went out, who he saw and did not see. Knox is terrible at having more than one focus. Without permission, Charlie had become that. He’s

aware of a loneliness worse, even, than the one after breaking things off with Cheryl. Knox doesn't want to drink this one away. He only wants to undo it.

Being a man of grand gesture, there's just one path forward.

On a snowy day in early March, Knox returns to a Midtown bar. The weather is cold enough to snow and warm enough that it melts on the pavement, sticking to the dirt and grit pushed up against the curb or settling in fluffy white patches over uncollected bags of garbage, but it's a slushy grey mess wherever people have walked. Knox tracks it in as he ducks through the entry door, stamping his feet against a smooth-worn mat placed over that dizzying tile.

His hair is damp, cold, and falling loose. The grease in it doesn't hold firm as errant snowflakes melt, exposed to the warmth of the bar. Knox shakes snow off the shoulders of his overcoat when he removes it. Tucked up inside his breast pocket, a folded page awaits.

Knox finds his mark among the men most closely clustered on the floor. They sit around a table, all watching Charlie speak. His arms are raised to emphasize, or transfix, or illustrate; he talks with his whole body, performing as they would never dare. He's an outrage, he's unpleasant, dressed in bold checked wool. He's the closest friend Knox has ever lost, and that can no longer stand.

Charlie might want something Knox can't provide, but that's no reason not to ask.

So Knox steps forward, ignoring the bar, and his approach makes Charlie's shoulders stiffen. Like Charlie knows what's coming, from footsteps and shadows alone, he braces himself against it. "Pardon me," Charlie says, but Knox corners him in, a table to his back and faceless bankers to each side and Knox himself, plain but tall and steely, unfolding the page from his pocket.

"Knox, don't you dare," Charlie pleads. It's too late.

Knox reads:

"Guest am I to have
Light my northern room
Why to cordiality so averse to come
Other friends adjourn
Other bonds decay
Why avoid so narrowly

My fidelity —”

“Dear god,” someone says. Knox can’t see them. His vision is exclusively in front of him, on the one face that matters.

Charlie’s mouth flaps open and shut, open and shut.

“I thought of you,” Knox says, earnestly.

Charlie nods. “I’m sure that you did. But I think that you should go.”

“Yes. Come with me?”

“No, I—no.” There’s not much hope of it, anyway; a crowd has formed, all the stiff suits standing up and milling about in a lame imitation of upset. Nonetheless, bodies take space. They drive Knox and Charlie apart, pushing Knox towards the door, and it’s all he can do to catch a last glance at Charlie’s pale, blank face.

What other people don’t know about grand gestures—people who don’t use them, who eschew them as tacky and thoughtless—is that they work, but never as one expects. Knox has experience, so he knows not to hang around outside the bar that night or return the next. One way or another, Charlie will respond. Knox has played his cards, irrefutably, unavoidably, and so Charlie must let him know how their hands compare. The discomfort will sit with Charlie until it is done.

Early April brings a ringing buzzer. After eight at night following a day of rain, Knox isn’t expecting visitors. When Knox sticks his head out of his window to peer down, what he sees first is how streetlights shine and flare off of the wet asphalt, how moody puddles are limned by oily iridescence in the low light. Then, behind all that dazzle, is Charlie: in a hat and long coat, both drably brown, dressed as a man not wishing to be noticed.

Knox buzzes him in.

“Who was it?” Charlie asks, barely through the door. “Who was it that wrote the poem? It wasn’t you.”

“Dickinson.”

“Dickinson,” Charlie says, shaking his head as he takes off his hat and coat and shoes. Staying awhile. His jacket goes too, tie already

hanging loose, sleeves rumpled and cuffs unbuttoned like he'd been in his own home, undressed, then thrown it all back on again to rush out. "I didn't know you read Dickinson."

"I didn't know you stopped reading," Knox replies.

"Math, Knoxious. Math, San Francisco, and men."

"And is that what those men in the bar were? Is that what they are for you?"

"Don't be dramatic," Charlie scoffs. His hair flutters when he tosses his head. "Those are bankers, Knox. I have better taste than bankers."

The air in Knox's chest is too thick. He can barely push it through his lungs. "Lawyers, then?"

Charlie's just as affected, quiet when he answers. "One, in particular."

"Will you—come over here," Knox says, but he's the one who walks over, too impatient for consistency. "Charlie," he grips Charlie by the shoulders, shaking him until he looks up, "Before I blew it all on a misunderstanding, what was it you wanted from me?"

"Nothing," Charlie lies.

"You could have told me to go screw myself. We weren't really friends anymore. You would have told Cameron to jump in the Hudson. But you wanted to see me, even if you didn't seek me out."

"When did you learn how to talk about these things, Knox?"

Knox touches his left thumb to his ring finger, still empty. "When I thought I was going to get married."

Charlie looks stricken. There's no sound in the apartment, not even the low hum of a radio with its dial stuck between 'off' and 'on,' so there's nothing to cover the noise of clothes rustling as they shift closer.

"I am sorry about that."

"It's not your fault," Knox says, slipping back into formalities. He wants so badly to know what lives in Charlie's head that he burns, sweat sticking his palms to Charlie's already-wrinkled shirt. His hands must feel like touching a radiator, but Charlie doesn't complain or shake him off.

Because, in his heart, Knox thinks he does know what Charlie would say. He thinks he's got the idea of it: Charlie liked him. Likes him? In the present tense, it feels juvenile. Back at Welton, it could be juvenile. Fooling around when classes let out, having it off in someone's dorm room with a chair wedged under the handle to keep it shut. Charlie always kissed. Other boys didn't kiss. Some of that was just Charlie's essential nature, refusing to keep up a pretense of propriety if he was already touching another guy's dick, but maybe some of that was more. Knox never got to ask, what with how the final year went down.

And on that cold January night when Knox first brought Charlie home, this would have been upsetting and untenable. Charlie was right to stick to the impersonal instead of opening up about all this. Reckless sex with an old friend was perfectly *Charlie*, believable and justifiable and ultimately forgettable—if Knox had been anyone else. But Knox wasn't someone else; he was a man who took a long time to figure out his thoughts and put them to action, and once he got those thoughts in order, there would be action. Charlie had only needed to be patient.

Eight years was a long time to be patient. Knox can't blame Charlie, not really, for thinking maybe he'd already put himself through enough waiting.

"What a fucking mess," Knox says, under his breath, surprising himself. He sinks to his knees, right there in the center of his apartment, and pushes his nose into Charlie's groin. "Stop me if you don't want it, Charlie." One of Charlie's hands threads through Knox's hair, knocking it loose from its gel. "Stop me," Knox almost begs, and the hand soothes him, pets him.

Charlie's belt comes off. His trousers open easily. He's not hard when Knox gets his boxers down, which is good, because Knox has never done this before. He should be more afraid—or, not afraid, but cautious, careful, aware of his own inability. He isn't; he takes Charlie's whole cock in his mouth because he can, because it's soft, because he can suck and lick Charlie erect.

Above him, Charlie gasps. It's the only sound he's made since apologizing and it barely counts, a whisper of a breath of pleasant surprise. Knox's blow job surely isn't good, but it's a mouth on a cock, and he's never known a man to complain about that. Charlie's fingers grip him harder, not tugging him in a direction but *tugging*, like Knox is a stable pier and Charlie's caught in the salty Atlantic, clinging that

he might not be swept away.

It makes Knox feel powerful. Desirable. More potent and alive than he's been in years, not since sex still felt like it held mystery, like there was more to learn and do. That is and always has been Charlie: flippant and fresh and terrifying. Charlie moans now, his other hand catching around Knox's throat like he wants to feel himself inside of it —a more mental thrill than a practical one, at this juncture—and Knox is proud, hot, aroused at the thought of dragging the sound out of silent Charlie.

He pulls off, briefly, to suck in air; he kisses the tip of Charlie's cock, wetly pink, and thinks that he's done that. He's the reason it no longer fits in his mouth, the reason he needs a hand to stroke the lower shaft. Charlie wants this. Charlie hasn't stopped him. Charlie places Knox's free hand on his sack, mumbles a quiet instruction to touch it. Knox goes nearly mad at feeling another man's balls in his palm, the way they tighten as Charlie gets closer and how Charlie groans when Knox gently squeezes them. Knox can feel the root of Charlie's erection in the stretch of skin behind and he tries things he's only thought about, pushing carefully against that place, watching Charlie's sack twitch and jump in response.

Charlie is so close to orgasm that his grip gets loose. He scrabbles for it, winding his fingers into Knox's hair again and again, only to lose it over and over, warring between the impulse to stay present and the growing impossibility of control. Knox can taste the bitter spurts of precome on his tongue and he decides then and there that he'll swallow it or die trying. More than anything, he wants to be good for Charlie. He wants to say with his mouth, not his words, that he knows —he understands, and he likes Charlie too, maybe like that or maybe not but they've got to try, god damn it.

Knox sucks and Charlie comes, hands on Knox's shoulders for support, shuddering and cringing when Knox doesn't know how to gentle him through it. Semen tastes terrible. Charlie's heavy as all hell. But Knox did it, he sucked a dick, and he's happy and proud and desperate to get himself off.

"Let me," Charlie says, noticing the movement of Knox's spit-slippery hands. "Let me."

On the floor, puddled together, Charlie sucks him off. Knox doesn't last at all and doesn't care, because the build was already done and it's the part after that he wants, feeling his skin shiver everywhere that

Charlie touches it. His head and shoulders ache against the wood floor but he won't move for anything, not while he has Charlie's head on his shoulder and they're both still a little high.

Somewhere in the city, a clock chimes the hour. Charlie will need to leave and Knox will need to sleep; the parting is unavoidable.

"Tomorrow," Knox tells him. "See me again tomorrow."

"It isn't just sex for me, Knoxy." Charlie is serious, he has the line between his eyes, but he's got enough hope to tease. Knox kisses his furrow and it doesn't go away, but Charlie's whole face softens.

"See me again tomorrow and we won't have sex."

Charlie grins. "Well, hold on a second. I didn't say it wasn't also the sex."

"See me again tomorrow and we will have sex! See me again and do what you will, Charlie, but I've penciled you in already." Knox taps the side of his own head, intentionally goofy. "The mental planner's all booked. It's your time to use."

"Just like that?"

"Just like eight years of distance and two months of sex and a few more weeks of finally coming around to the possibility. Sorry," Knox says. "I am trying. I promise you that I am trying."

Charlie looks up at him, his collar skewed to one side and hair in his eyes. Wryly, he says, "I wish you had tried a little less. *Dickinson.*"

"Be glad it wasn't an original."

"I am, Knoxious. God knows that I am."

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